

# The Artist As Social Worker Vs. The Artist as Social Wanker<sup>1</sup> Or Five Acts of How

Anthony Schrag

## First Act: Introductions

Play is a ground-breaking theatre piece written by Samuel Beckett in 1962. The work is dense and modernist unpicking of a relationship between a man, his longterm partner and his mistress. It is an autopsy of their interactions delivered in dense, chopped language. Beckett instructed that the speech should be “likened to a lawn mower – a burst of energy followed by a pause, a renewed burst followed by another pause.”<sup>2</sup> It is both relentless and painful to watch, and five lines before the end, Beckett gives single 2 word stage direction: *repeat play*.

I came across the work as a melodramatic teenager and was struck by the significance of that single instruction so near the play’s completion. The idea that we would have to live through the torment of relational triad again was almost too much to bear. It unravelled me.

On one hand, I could not quite elide the small, almost insignificant directorial instruction with vastness of its symbolism: Life was endless repetition, futile and complicated and difficult and this had been encapsulated in 2 small words. The simplicity of it pinned me down with a hopeless weight because I instantly understood that this was the nature of of all human life: pointlessly, endlessly repeated.

On the other hand, I revelled in Beckett’s audacity. I laughed out loud because he casually, humorously, almost with a touch of sadism, revealed the ache of endlessly repeated lives - *with only slight variations* - in such a simple manner that we actually *wanted*

---

1 The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines ‘Wanker’ as British vulgar slang for: “a contemptible person.” It is mostly employed as a form of generalised abuse, with specific reference - albeit not literally - to masturbation. However, I employ it in direct reference to the notion of ‘contempt’ in that a contemptible person is one who might critique established and accepted modes of power, as in: ‘contempt of court’. A wanker, in this reading, is then the one who intentionally operates to unravel accepted social, cultural patterns.

2 C. J., Ackerley & S. E., Gontarski, (Eds.) *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, London: Faber and Faber, 200. p 445

to “repeat play” and go through it all again and again. This wanting, explained my Grade 10 English teacher, Mrs Gubbe (with her pixie-hair and her arthritic hands) was *absurdity*. This is what it meant to go on in the face such existentialism.

She had introduced the play, no doubt, to get us teenagers to explore philosophy and examine the *why* of absurdity? For me, however, it was never a question of *why*. The truth is that we know the answer to *why*: we keep going onwards, forward, upwards because we have no other option. As W2 (the Mistress) says in *Play*: “At the same time I prefer this to . . . the other thing. Definitely. There are endurable moments.” Or, as Beckett writes in *Worstward Ho* (1983) “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

I have, therefore, never been much concerned with *why*, and see the more difficult problem in regards to absurdity is *how*. *How* do we keep going forwards, onwards, upwards? *How* is a more difficult thing because it talks about practicalities; about the minutia of making; the everyday on-goingness of going-on. It speaks of time and the differences within times, and how methodologies might change.

*How* is, of course, a question of methodology. Indeed, this collection of texts explores artists’ research and the ‘how’ of that research. There has been, over the past few decades, a seemingly endless examination of the topic of Arts-Practice-As-Research, and many a publication has variously expanded on the flaws, strengths, purpose, function, infrastructure, and role of such works. It seems absurd to think that I could add to that discussion in any meaningful way. But I shall try, and will inevitably fail, try and hopefully “fail better.”

An artist and researcher (with a Practice-based PhD) my analysis of *how* practice-based research exists as a contribution to new knowledge aligns with Langerman (2015): “For me the problem with the PhD in Fine Art is not that practice is a form of inquiry [that] can be used to formulate an argument, but whether an argument [via practice] can ever be conclusive or verifiable. Art relies on a degree of incompleteness.”<sup>3</sup> I would add, also, that art-in-the-making (i.e., before it has been historicised or given a critical framework externally) is always concerned with unravelling structures, exploring new systems and existing within the unknowable. As such, art-in-the-making is antithetical to known structures: “That form of research cannot be channeled through rigid academic-scientific guidelines dealing with generalisation, duplication, and quantification, since it engages in the unique, the qualitative, the particular, and the local.”<sup>4</sup>

To fit this form of ‘making’ into such formulaic systems as a traditional PhD, is in itself absurd because the form is a continually changing beast. Like Hydra, it will grow new forms as we fix and formalise each previous one into place. To address this, Slager suggests Duchamp’s approach to solve this ontological conundrum: “against the thought that one could define art beforehand, Duchamp poses that we should approach each work of art as if it is the very first work of art. That implies that the definition — and thus also the method — of the work of art is determined again and again during the artistic process.”<sup>5</sup>

3 F. Langerman. (2015) ‘The exploded book — creative research practice in natural history museums’ J. Quaresma & F. R. Dias (eds) *Research in Arts: The Oscillation of the Methods*. Lisbon: InPrintout. 2015. P. 71

4 H. Slager (2015) ‘Experimental Aesthetics’ J. Quaresma & F. R. Dias (eds) *Research in Arts: The Oscillation of the Methods*. Lisbon: InPrintout. 2015. P. 85

5 H. Slager (2015) ‘Experimental Aesthetics’ J. Quaresma & F. R. Dias (eds) *Research in Arts: The Oscillation of the Methods*. Lisbon: InPrintout. 2015. P. 84

This leads me to the subject of this paper which relates to this notion of approaching each work ‘as if it is the very first work of art’. While I understand the necessity of this within the context of Artist-Practice-As-Research analysis, it is my suggestion that this is problematic *in application* because it does not take into account history, legacy or previous learning. Specific to this text and my practice, I see this problematic emerging as a continual ‘reinvention of the wheel’ within Participatory Practices and other relational art works which occur within the social realm. Like Beckett’s play, without consideration of the practice’s past, the genre becomes an absurd recurrent *déjà vu*, with only slight variation.

Part of this repetition is, no doubt, due to the ephemeral nature of the practice of ‘participation’: appropriate objects and records rarely remain, and so its history is always dust. Or, at least, it comes to dust much quicker than other histories. I will not address this ephemerality within this text, but rather explore the collective amnesia of agencies (and artists) in relation to the *how* of participatory practices, specifically in regards to notion of ‘art as a tool of social betterment’.

This is a pressing concern because recent years have seen a burgeoning development of the practice. No longer considered a fringe activity, it receives major attention from policy-makers, institutions, conferences, large funding initiatives, academic journals, as well as the establishment of a number of dedicated MA courses. All this activity guides a professionalisation and instrumentalisation of the practice either from government agencies who might position it as ‘*social work lite*’,<sup>6</sup> or from activist agents who might use the practice for their own utopian social engineering. It is therefore a crucial time to reflect on and analyse the multiple different approaches. On one hand, the diversity within the field is one of its key strengths, with participatory arts projects found in many trans-disciplinary contexts: educational, arts & design, commercial, activist, political, etc. On the other hand, this diversity in approaches and conceptualisations leaves little room for the practice’s development (or critique), especially when organisations, artists and publics have vastly different intentions and methodologies, and it is approached in practicality as if it were the first time ‘as if it is the very first work of art’.

Various theorists, practitioners and critics have addressed the subject and its myriad forms, including Su Braden’s *Art and People* (1978), Owen Kelly’s *Storming the Citadels* (1984), Suzanne Lacy’s *New Genre Public Art* (1995), *Conversations Pieces* by Grant Kester (2004) and *Artificial Hells* by Claire Bishop (2012), to name a few. Problematically, each has claimed a ‘true’ definition of the practice, leading to a series of spats<sup>7</sup> and ‘stooshies’<sup>8</sup> which have further divided the field; further complicated the *how* in favour of focusing on the *why*. However, through-out all of these theorisations, there is an underlying question about the relationship Participatory Art projects have with notions of amelioration. In-

6 See for example, E. Belfiore & O. Bennett, (2007) *Rethinking The Social Impacts of The Arts*. International Journal of Cultural Policy, 13:2. pp. 135 – 151

7 One of the more public being the Kester Vs. Bishop on the pages of Artforum in 2006. For a selected example of the fallout of this ‘spat’, see: ‘Metamute’, 10 May 2007, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/zombie-nation>. (Available online – Accessed 18 December 2014) or ‘Impex’, May 2006, [http://www.impex-info.org/text/texts\\_ibz\\_eng\\_05.html](http://www.impex-info.org/text/texts_ibz_eng_05.html). (Available online – Accessed 18 December 2014) or ‘Incubate’, June 2011, <http://incubate-chicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/InCUBATE-What-do-Artists-Know.pdf>. (Available online – Accessed 18 December 2014)

8 D. Stevenson (2014) ‘Tartan and tantrums: critical reflections on the Creative Scotland “stooshie”’. *Cultural Trends*, Volume 23, Issue 3, 2014. Special Issue: Scottish Cultural Policy. P 178 -187. ‘Stooshie’ is a scottish term for an argument; hearty discussion.

deed, the notion of ‘social betterment through art’ leads to oft proposed praxis of ‘artist as social worker’ within participatory settings, addressing the persistent concern of *how* are we interacting with the public, and to what end?



Diagram 1.1: Branch diagram of ‘Participatory Art Genres’. A. Schrag, 2014.

## Act Two: Social Practice As Social Betterment?

Grant Kester writes of the link between the participatory artist and the social worker:

Both the community artist and the social worker possess a set of skills (bureaucratic, diagnostic, aesthetic/expressive, and so forth) and have access to public and private funding (through grants writing, official status, and institutional sponsorship) with the goal of bringing about some transformation in the condition of individuals who are presumed to be in need.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Kester collapses the careers of social work and artist, and reveals a common conceptualisation of participatory practices in its relation to social betterment, specifically about the artist working with people and how and why he/she does this (and upon whose authority). He does this by drawing on the similarities he sees in what participatory artworks try to do, and what social workers try to do - i.e., bringing around transformation to those ‘in need’. My concerns about this elision are twofold - one is about practicalities and the other is about intention.

Before exploring these two concerns it is useful to define ‘Social Worker’. The International Federation of Social Work defines the practice as a “practice-based *profession* and

9 Kester, Grant. *Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art*. Afterimage 22, January 1995

an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.”<sup>10</sup> In the UK, it refers to someone *employed* to provide social services (especially to the disadvantaged).<sup>11</sup>

I have highlighted two key words in the above paragraph - ‘profession’ and ‘employed’ - as they provide a clue to my first concern regarding practicalities. A *profession* suggests specialised training, formalised schools of thought and education. Similarly the notion of *employed* suggests someone who is part of a larger organisation with structures, hierarchies, institutional policies and various different levels of support. Therefore, to conduct social work requires specialised training, regular funding, inter-agency co-operation, systems of support and guiding policy/theory in order for it to achieve its goal. It requires infrastructure. In contrast, an artist is usually a single individual without social-work training, often working without institutional support and rarely in regular employment within a structured system. Indeed, an artist rarely has a clearly defined job description! So, on a practical level it would be highly problematic to assume the artist could effectively or practically conduct the business of social work without the formal structures of its profession.

Similarly, and regarding my secondary concern of intention, social work is often run out of governmental agencies or funded by them, thereby operating within a public mandate that gives it the ethical framework to act on/with/for such disadvantaged people. (Granted, it is more problematic for my argument that there are wholly private organisations which run aspects of social work - i.e., missionaries, churches, etc. - and would argue these are the exceptions rather than the norm.) An artist, by contrast has no public mandate that justifies him/her to act upon/with/for a public group of people, thus making his/her actions of engaging with them ethically problematic at worst and paternalistic at best.

This is also illustrated by (and a concern of) the institutional intent of art projects within participatory settings in regards to ‘social betterment.’ The social worker operates within an institutional setting whose policy is holistic, and has strategies about how and what needs to be done to achieve their social work goals - it may be different from other social workers and there may be a plethora of perspectives of how to achieve goals, but there are a set of decided upon policies within agencies that guide a social worker’s project. Again, in contrast, an artist usually is employed to operate from/with a gallery/museum context, which has multiple intentions, but primarily is concerned ‘art’. As such, an artist working on a ‘social betterment’ agenda either becomes a tack-on or an addendum to a wider programme at best, or at worst, an ersatz government employee operating via publicly funded art gallery outreach programmes.

If the institution does manage to embed participatory practices effectively - and there are few who have - then this work falls close to the ‘is it art?’ vortex, which can be - when done well - incredibly exciting, but when done poorly, can drain one’s reason for living in seconds. The ‘doing it well’ is done via clear intentions and an alignment to criticality via the agonist approach above - but that is for a different article. For now, we’re left with

<sup>10</sup> The International Federation of Social Work (n.d.) <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> (Available Online - Accessed May 15th, 2016)

<sup>11</sup> The International Federation of Social Work (n.d.) <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> (Available Online - Accessed May 15th, 2016)

a the concern that the artist (even working with an institution) is a poor substitute for a social worker and it would be dangerous to suggest one could do the other, and this leads us down the instrumentalised path where the artist is the state's cheaper option to proper and appropriate social work. See Andy Hewitt's *Privatizing the public: Three rhetorics of art's public good in 'Third Way' cultural policy* (2011)<sup>12</sup> for further reading on this topic.

A last brief point Kester's collapsing the two fields: To collapse the fields into one devalues both. It disavows the unique specialisms in each - art's ability to ask deep and probing questions and social works ability to be wholly committed to social betterment. This does not suggest that the separate worlds can never collide, only that it would be dangerous to replace one with the other because they would both be made weaker, not stronger.

So where does this leave us - those artists who work with people? How are we to continue the endless absurdity of 'how' to do participatory practices, if not via this flawed notion of social betterment? What are the *slight variations* in the repeated play?

### Act Three: New Knowledge from Understanding The Old: Developments in Practice

For me, this requires an exploration of the semantics that have grown out 'participatory art.' When we choose to work with people, are we a socially engaged artist? A community artist? A community-engaged artist? A community-based artist? Someone with a social practice? A dialogical practice? A relational practice? A participatory artist? An activist artist? A public artist? Someone who does public art? Or someone who just works with other people? Each of these terms will connote a different relationship with the public with different desired outcomes and while I would reject a simplification and elision of these terms into a single monolithic framing, I similarly reject the lack of clarity that comes when these terms are used interchangeably. This is particularly apparent in the diversity of intent - especially relating to the 'betterment' agenda - that is revealed when interacting other practitioners within the participatory realm. We may all be working with people, but we all seem to be doing it very differently - and for very different reasons.

Historically, the practice is not new: culture has always been done *with* people, and the criteria of what makes 'participation' a unique field is arbitrary. One could easily argue *all* art is participatory to some degree. Consider the 1553 painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein, in which only viewers standing at a certain angle to the canvas can see a skull, while others merely see a smudge of paint and colours. This could be said to illustrate that Holbein was not only aware of the viewing public's position, but also developed context specific and relational experiences with him/her, much like contemporary notions of Participatory Art. However, this is not a useful approach as it ignores the nuances in intent, and so to unravel further the absurdity of 'social betterment through art' it is important that I provide my own distinctions of the above terms.

While there are variations and additional verbs to clarify meanings (i.e., community-based vs community-engaged: one signifying a locational practice and the other sig-

<sup>12</sup> Hewitt, A. (2011) 'Privatising the Public: Three rhetorics of art's public good in 'Third Way' cultural policy' in *Art & the Public Sphere*, 1:1, pp. 19 – 36.

nifying an engagement *with* from an external body) broadly, the main terms in use are: Community Arts, Activism Art, Socially Engaged Art, Dialogic Art, Relational Art, and Public Art. I have excluded ‘participatory’ practices in this list of definitions as this seems to be the over-arching terminology that defines the practice as a whole, in the same way that ‘painting’ incorporates the many different type of paintings. Below, I give a brief description of each of these sub-genres, and have also included an example after each.

1) *Community Arts*: Stemming from the Community Arts Movement (CAM), this ‘older’ form of a participatory practice came to the fore in the 1970s and ’80s as a practice rooted in the artist working in collaboration with communities, which were usually those perceived as being in a disadvantaged state (poverty, substance abuse, etc.) and whom artists “sought to empower through participatory creative practice.”<sup>13</sup> It often resulted in community-based and community-constructed objects – i.e. community murals/mosaics similar to the work developed by David Harding during his time as the Town Artist (1968–1978) in Glenrothes.<sup>14</sup>

2) *Socially Engaged Practice* (SEP): SEP is in line with notions of ‘social betterment’, like Community Arts, but is also concerned with the systems that sustain community oppression. However, it is less concerned with direct political action (like Activist Art below) and more with a commitment to social change and development via consciousness-raising. It often, though not necessarily, results in public events authored by the artist, in collaboration with participants. An example of this is Jardín Botánico de Culiacán’s *Palas por Pistolas* (2007) in which the artist collected guns from a community and then melted them into steel to fabricate shovels that he then used with the community to dig holes in order to plant trees.<sup>15</sup>

3) *Activist Art*: this practice is strongly aligned with leftist politics and dedicated to the emancipation of participants and the liberation of the society via a critique of oppressive (Capitalist and Neoliberal) regimes, with a primary concern being direct intervention into power structures. It is primarily event-based, although it can assume other means, such as posters, graffiti, publications, etc.. An example of this would be The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army who merge clowning with civil disobedience to enact non-violent direct action in situations of protest.<sup>16</sup>

4) *Dialogic*: described above and associated with Grant Kester, this way of working is fundamentally concerned with artworks framed as conversation and exchange, configuring the public not as an ‘audience’ but rather as a collaborator. It aims to avoid the

13 C. Bishop. (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso. p. 177.

14 D. Harding (n.d.) ‘The Town Artist’. Undated, David Harding Website: [www.davidharding.net/townartist](http://www.davidharding.net/townartist), (Available online – 16 October 2014).

15 ‘Palas Por Pistolas’. (n.d.) <http://pedroreyes.net/palasporpistolas.php>, (Available online – Accessed 16 October 2014).

16 ‘Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army’. (n.d.) <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/ clandestine-insurgent-rebel-clown-army/> (Available online – Accessed 11 December 2014)



paternalism which might be engendered via an ‘outsider’ working within a community that is not his/her own and demands the power structures to be more egalitarian between the artist and the participant, where both can be influenced by the other. It often results in a plethora of outputs, both gallery-based and public. The work of Oda Projesi is a good example of this work: Three artists have been collaborating with neighbours in an area of Istanbul developing workshops, drawing sessions, discussion groups, community picnics, parades and other community events as way to provide space for dialogue and discussion on topics that were important to their lives, including community politics.<sup>17</sup> This approach can be often seen to be similar to the Community Art Movement (CAM), however it differs in the relationship it has to the ‘art institution: whereas CAM was purposefully sited outside the art world, Dialogical works have a more blurred relationship to contemporary art. For example: Oda Projesi hired a room to exhibit artworks in a traditional gallery format, and exhibits the documents of their time with their Neighbours in other galleries and art contexts out with of that neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> In other words, unlike CAM there is not an intentional break from the traditional art institution, and dialogical artists are “interdisciplinary. It operates ‘between’ discourses (art and activism, for example) and between institutions (the gallery and the community centre or the housing block).”<sup>19</sup>

5) *Relational Aesthetics*: a practice described by Nicolas Bourriaud that is based within the (conceptual/physical) structures of art institutions and sought new, more social ways of engaging with publics other than with traditional object-base works. They are primarily structural and/or events-based artworks, and occur primarily within institutional frameworks – i.e. gallery constructs and biennials. An example of this would be Liam Gillick’s designed environments staged in galleries that encourage and frame a variety of social relationships.<sup>20</sup>

6) *Public Art*: these are works that are funded or approved by public bodies, such a Local Authorities and (while not exclusively) they are more-often-than-not sculptural or semi-permanent. They primarily iterate a public concern and/or interest and often result in objects placed in the public sphere. An example of this would be Antony Gormley’s *Angel of the North* (1998).<sup>21</sup>

A further breakdown of these terms is necessary to discuss the *intent* of each of these works, and this can be illustrated by the diagram below that features the above terms and their ‘domain.’ By domain, I mean *that which gives the work its meaning*; the frame through

17 ‘Oda Projesi’ (2007). Oda Projesi Website, <http://odaprojesi.blogspot.co.uk/>. (Available online – Accessed 11 December 2014).

18 G. Coulter-Smith, 2006 ‘Deconstructing Installation Art’ *Installation Art Website* <http://www.installationart.net/Chapter6Conclusion/conclusion04.html>. (Available online – Accessed 14 March 2015).

19 G. Kester. (2000) ‘Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art’ *Variant Magazine*. Glasgow. Variant, Issue 9. Special Supplement.

20 ‘Liam Gillick’ (n.d.) Tate Website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/liam-gillick-2592>. (Available online – Accessed 18 May, 2015).

21 ‘Angel Of The North’ (2015) Gateshead Government Website, <http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/attractions/Angel/Home.aspx>. (Available online – Accessed 11 December 2014)



which the work's presence in this world is justified. As above, this does not constitute a binding or rigid structure, but how I am defining this practice in regards to how I see it operate, as a practitioner and researcher in the field.



Diagram 1.2: *Interacting Venn Diagram of Participatory Art Genres, and their derivative power sources.* A Schrag, 2013.

Within the diagram, the definitions are clustered into pairs, each pair sitting into one of three spheres: institutional, political or social practice. Within the Institutional sphere, the working processes - relational and public art - defer to the institutions of power that define the works intention: Public art is funded and ordained by public bodies and Relational works are concerned with new types of (public) relationships within the art galleries/museums. Both defaults to the power of the authority that funds/organises them, and therefore the intent of their work is to recapitulate and reinforce that power, either of the public institution (ie, local government) or to the institution of art (museum/gallery). The general mood of these works are serious and deferential.

The Social Practice sphere illustrates that both Socially Engaged art and Community art defer to the community and their needs and desires. The works do not necessarily therefore contain any criticality of the systems that sustain the social sphere, but instead work from within those systems and the intent is to sustain a status quo - and defer to the construction of - community. The general sentiment of these works are nice and convivial.

The Political sphere defers to a criticality via Activism art and Dialogical artworks. The intent within them is to critique the politics that sustain oppression via either direct action (activism) or exploring a mutual line of inquiry between artists and participants which initiates a transformation for those engaged (dialogic). While not wholly replicating Grant Kester's Dialogical Aesthetics, Dialogic intent is similar in that that the works created aim to find a consensual meeting point that can transform society into a more egalitarian condition. The general mood of these political works is politically 'charged'

There are two last clarifications that should be discussed in regards to these definitions. Firstly, two more 'spheres' of intent should be placed overlapping the whole dia-

gram - they cannot be represented visually, as they are both the substrate on which these circles are places and can be present (and/or absent) in all spheres: these circles represent education and participation.

These two exist in constant tension, and are the very fabric of the question of intent when working with people: does an artist/institution/community want to engage in a 'participatory' project or and 'education' project? In latter - education - is a process of 'knowing/unknowing;' a power system of knowledge, and the assimilation of 'those who don't participate' into 'normal' structures via hierarchies such as schools and correctional facilities (i.e., prisons) into 'good citizens'. The former - participation - suggests a more collaborative and egalitarian process that has no premeditated outcomes. While the two are often collapsed, and complexly interwoven - no doubt participation involves some education and vice versa - the clarification of whether a project is educational or participatory will reveal its intent either as a form of social engineering to "*construct civic identities*"<sup>22</sup> amenable to the state, or if it is a true collaborative approach that is based on a dialogic, relational model with a mutual, shared and common inquiry. Indeed, knowing in which of these spheres of intent an art work sits is the very crux of deciphering *how* the 'social betterment' agenda is being employed, and to what end.

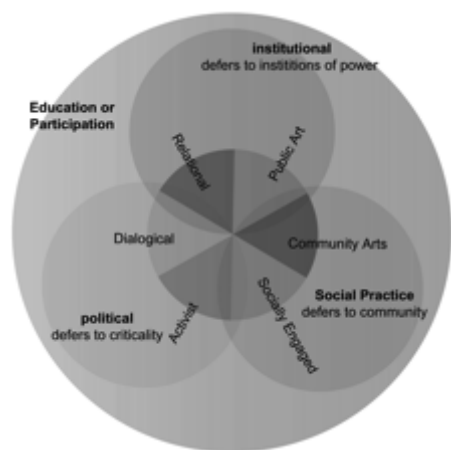


Diagram 1.3: *Education OR Participation as part of Interacting Venn Diagram of Participatory Art Genres, and their derivative power sources* A Schrag, 2013.

Drawing from these histories and different methodological approaches, one is able to use the legacy and learnings to develop a new model of practice that is able to clarify intentions and promote new ways of working with people: new ways of '*how*' to enact participation that might provide the *slight variations* to an otherwise endlessly repeated process. I refer to it as a 'conflictual participatory practice'; or employing an agonistic approach. This refers back to the discussion on Artist-Practice-As-Research in that it can take previous learnings and develop 'new knowledge'.

'Agonism' derives from Chantal Mouffe philosophy applied to critique power, but it does so not as a binary and oppositional enemy, but as an adversary: something/someone that is ultimately aiming for the same goal as another, but whose utopias may very well

22 J. Vickery. (2007) *The Emergence of Culture-led Regeneration: A policy concept and its discontents*. Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, Coventry: University of Warwick.

collide. As a method of working, it closely aligned to a 'dialogic' practice, as above, but frames itself via dialogic *disensus* (as opposed to consensus) in order to reveal the *intent* of a project first and foremost, both in content of the work but also in its mode of participation. The general feel of these works are confrontational and uncomfortable.

Additionally, it is important to differentiate between the dialogic intent of an agonistic approach to the dialogic intent of Grant Kester's Dialogical Aesthetics: agonistic intent is critical of the *political*, whereas Dialogical Aesthetics defaults to a criticality of *politics* - the former is concerned not with manifesting a specific utopia, but unravelling and revealing the political hegemony (i.e., Democrat Vs. Republican; Labour Vs. Tory etc); the latter is critical of a specific oppressive politics and seeks to create the world in a more egalitarian manner (See for example Conversation Pieces (Kester, 2004) P 69 - 81.) I have written about this elsewhere on '*Politics Vs Political*' debate, but briefly the *political* intent is critical of power in all its forms and manifestations, whereas *politics* replicates a 'right vs wrong' dichotomy. Agonist art, in contrast, aims to expose the ubiquitous political structures of life and living, rather than fight in the name of specific politics. Placing the 'art as a tool for social betterment' into a 'politics' frame obviously complicates the 'how' of participatory arts because it suggests there is a 'right' way of being and a 'wrong' way of making the social 'better'.

## Act Four: Examples of Agonistic Practice

I now present three examples of agonistic works which explore this particular framing of art within the social realm: Artur Zmijewski's *Them*, Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Please Love Austria*, and my own work, *Legacy of City Arts Projects*.

Artur Zmijewski's *Them* (2007) is an authored documentary film of an event organised by the artist to explore notions of collective identity, nationalism, co-operation and interaction between opposing ideological groups in his native Poland:

Zmijewski came of age bombarded by opposing ideologies. At art school, he and his peers were encouraged to finish each other's work, a sure-fire method to get students thinking about how meaning takes shape. A recurring concern throughout his work, Zmijewski would explicitly put this strategy to the test in his grimly funny 2007 piece *Them*. Four groups – Polish nationalists, Catholics, Jews and socialists – first make posters symbolising their beliefs and are then invited to amend each other's handiwork. After much ripping and graffiti-ing, the groups turn on each other, eventually burning the work and throwing it out of the window. Left with nothing, they seem to have reached an impasse, or possibly, less pessimistically, a place where, free of insignia, they might consider their situation anew.<sup>23</sup>

23 S. Sherwin, '(2010) Artist of the Week 101: Artur Zmijewski' The Guardian Website <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/aug/18/artist-of-week-artur-zmijewski> (Available Online - Accessed May 15, 2016)

The work, while problematically edited, as Zmijewski himself admits,<sup>24</sup> presents a situation of conflict rather than participation. Indeed the very notion of a participatory project is called into question by the introduction of active opposition between the social groups.

Here, Zmijewski embodies agonistic approach by organising a real-life situation wherein the conventions of participation - a situation where people *work together* or *collaborate* - are disregarded and ignored: He actively presents a situation wherein conflict might arise. The notion of working together is held in contempt, as he reveals this impossibility of that intention. It is, however, only through the mutual recognition of that impossibility that the participants '*might consider their situation anew.*'

Here Zmijewski is in contempt of the nature of participation itself, and in doing so he reveals the true complexity of a multiple and diverse society, and through which he presents the only possibility of a real and lasting social transformation. Imagine, for example, how a 'social betterment' artist might have found a way to work with such diverse groups and what insights (or not) they would have reached via encouraging consensus, rather than the illumination of the dissensus that actually existed. Via his agonistic approach Zmijewski complicated participation to explore its possibilities within the social sphere.

Another work that presents such a complex notion of participation is Christoph Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria*. In this work, Schlingensief presented a shipping container rigged with webcams that contained 12 illegal 'immigrants' which the public could 'vote out' via the internet. The project lasted six days and was situated in the heart of Vienna as part of the 2000 Vienna International Festival. Described as a 'reality TV event' by Schlingensief himself, the project is explained on his website:

Amid intense public interest, twelve participants introduced by Schlingensief as asylum-seekers spend one week in a cordoned-off, CCTVed shipping container complex next to the Vienna opera house. Blue flags representing Austria's far-right populist FPÖ party are hoisted on top of a container.

As onlookers applaud ambiguously, a sign bearing the slogan "Ausländer raus" ("Foreigners out") is unveiled and then attached to the container together with the logo of the Kronenzeitung, Austria's biggest-selling tabloid. Excerpts from speeches by FPÖ chairman Jörg Haider resound across Herbert-von-Karajan-Platz. With clear references to the BIG BROTHER TV show, the Austrian population are asked to phone in and vote out inhabitants, the two least popular of which are ejected each day. Votes can also be cast via the Internet, where Webfreetv broadcasts events from the container live - 24 hours a day for a period of six days.

The square is regularly visited by high-profile "patrons" such as acclaimed writer Elfriede Jelinek and political figures Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gregor Gysi, who then obligingly provide status reports.

24 C. Bishop, & S. Tramontana (eds.), (2009) *Double Agent*, London: ICA. pp. 99–106

Every morning at eight o'clock, two residents are ejected from the container to be deported to their native country. The winner can look forward to a cash prize and the prospect, depending on the availability of volunteers, of Austrian citizenship through marriage.<sup>25</sup>

Schlingensief himself played ringleader to this circus, standing next to or on-top of the counter with a megaphone and enjoining people to participate in voting out who they felt was not worth being a citizen, interviewing political leaders, and interacting with the large crowds that gathered outside the container that either admired or denounced the 'installation' depending on their own personal politics. A group of activists attempt to break into the container to 'free' the immigrants, and police were involved in several scuffles between the various political persuasions. Crucially, however, the work never presented the politics as 'good' or 'bad,' but rather, instead, actively revealed them and in this instance, Schlingensief problematised the dominant hegemony by revealing the alternative perspectives on the matter. He collapsed the politics and different ideological approaches of immigration into a singular spectacle that revealed, in visceral and telling manner, the structures of the politics, the relationship between the media and governmental policies, and the nature of participatory democracy.

The intention here was not to kowtow to specific ideologies and stereotypes of participatory art's supposed leftist agenda, but rather maintain a frustrating political ambiguity. He was disobedient to established codes of art and politics, and in this way complicated and problematised a simplistic (political) thinking in favour of a more realistic reflection of the world. Most illuminatingly, however, was that he disregarded the ethics of involving a disempowered group (immigrants) in the manner in which he did. It was only in doing so, however, that he could expose the population's own complicity in their relationship with racist politics. In doing so, the project caused more discussion and debate about Austrian immigration policies than the existence of a real and well-established detention centre, only a few miles from his theatrical re-staging.

Lastly, a project of my own. In 2007 The Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Glasgow held their third Social Justice programme. This was a bi-annual programme exploring human rights and contemporary arts with specific interest in those subjects that were relevant to Glasgow. The theme of the third biennial was to explore sectarianism (*Blind Faith*, 2007), perceived to be a major social blight in the city, exacerbated by religious, geographical and class divisions.

Each of the Social Justice programmes comprised a large exhibition and many smaller outreach and education projects that were more 'participatory' in nature, intended to engage with various 'non-art' audiences for whom the topic was perceived as relevant. I was selected to work with identified young people in the east of Glasgow to develop art projects that might have an ameliorative effect on the participants via a creative inquiry into sectarianism. This 'orthopaedic approach'<sup>26</sup> was apparent in the funding applications: "The emphasis throughout the residency will be one of social inclusion, with [the artist]

25 J. Jessen. (n.d) ('Please Love Austria'. *Schlingensief Website* [www.schlingensief.com](http://www.schlingensief.com) (Available Online - Accessed December 2, 2014)

26 Kester. G. (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p.88.

working particularly with groups from Glasgow's communities that have high levels of deprivation, and little access to the arts, in line with the Council's policy of delivering its services equally to all"<sup>27</sup> and "by using the power of contemporary art to challenge public attitudes we believe we can contribute to the development of a more tolerant society."<sup>28</sup>

Once the project began it quickly became apparent that the issues faced by the young people were only superficially related to sectarianism but due to systemic poverty and I felt I could not affect this social inequality. I also realised that I was being located as an ersatz social worker, in the sense that the goals of the project located in a specific 'social inclusion' ideology and its neoliberal approach.

The participants were therefore perceived as somehow flawed and the community in need of *fixing*, and the institution (the city council-funded GoMA) employed its dominant position to address these flaws via the transformative potential of art. In this case art was being used as a tool of social renewal without analysis of what this 'renewal' meant, to whom, why it was necessary and who might benefit. Hewitt expands this notion and suggests the social inclusion approach pre-conceives a 'correct way of being' that the art project is required to socially engineer and that this denies the agency of community participants, as well as any pre-existing, indigenous culture of the community involved.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, in being hired by the institution, I felt indebted to GoMA and its participation aims, and raises a question as to how artists retain a sense of criticality when one's job is ultimately to support the institution's agenda. I felt there was a disjunction between the intentions of the institution and the lived reality of the identified community.



Image 1.1: Photographic documentation of *Legacy Of City Arts Projects*, A Schrag, 2007. Easterhouse, Glasgow.

Therefore, instead of attempting an orthopaedic intervention, I focused on the Institution that commissioned the project, inviting the curators, advisory board, the civil servants and representatives from the charitable trust who guided the project, to come

27 Submitted to Author by main applicant, Social Inclusion Officer Katie Bruce, Oct 2012. Drawn from funding application issued by Scottish Arts Council, 2006 (Emphasis added)

28 Submitted to Author by main applicant, Social Inclusion Officer Katie Bruce, Oct 2012. Drawn from funding application issued by Scottish Arts Council, 2006 (Emphasis added)

29 Hewitt, A. (2011) 'Privatising the Public: Three rhetorics of art's public good in 'Third Way' cultural policy' in *Art & the Public Sphere*, 1:1, pp. 19 – 36.

to GoMA to discuss the mismatch between “place and policy.”<sup>30</sup> However, when these people arrived, expecting a meeting in the neoclassical art gallery, I bundled them into waiting taxis and drove them out to the east of Glasgow, effectively ‘kidnapping’ them, and taking them to a muddy field, where a table and chairs waited, surrounded by the residents of the housing estate. The intention was to have this discussion, but have it in a place that was away from the marble and neoclassical structures of power and instead in the very real, disrupt-able, cold and noisy location that was the everyday reality of those citizens involved with the project.

Here, the intention literally enacted a “contempt of court”<sup>31</sup> in that the event went against established modes of a traditional participatory practice (i.e., the focus of the work was ‘with’ the institution, rather than the public) thus being disobedient to those structures. It also upset the dominant hegemony by disregarding the traditional respect paid to curators, civil servants and trust representatives in favour of an alternative social approach. The situation ignored the structures that are required for a smooth social functioning, and through this, the flaws of the intentions - the enacted policies - could be revealed and critiqued affectively.

It was the objective of all these works to explore the intent of ‘institutions,’ or of ‘community,’ or of ‘politics,’ thereby revealing the power dynamics at play within those spheres and it is only through the revelation of those intents can we begin to discuss ‘social betterment through art.’ In other words, once we know what the intent and reason of an artist or institution has for working with people, then we can clarify what is meant by ‘social betterment through art’ and to whom it is functioning to ‘make better.’ Knowing this allows us to decode participatory artworks and through what processes we judge them, thereby allowing us to understand the intentions of why an artist/institution might be working with people and for what reasons. Additionally, it clarifies how a practice might exist as ‘research’ but also how it chooses to operate within the social.

In this manner, instead of approaching an artwork as if it were “the very first work of art” as suggested by Slager (2015) via Duchamp, thinkers, practitioners and critics of the field are called on to review, critique and build on histories in order to decipher and decode a work’s meaning and purpose. Practice-As-Research, in this situation, then becomes part of a functional, productive legacy rather than a unique imaginary.

This text, obviously, is not attempting to discredit a *unique imaginary*. On the contrary, as I say above: Art is always concerned with unravelling structures, exploring new systems and existing within the unknowable. The unique imaginary is its salience. However, in order for any work to develop and grow - indeed, to confirm we contribute to new knowledge — we must develop Artist-Practice-As-Research within a context of history in order for us to not re-invent the wheel; a wheel that has already traveled a path, perhaps many times over.

## Act Five: Conclusion

30 Quote from Mark O’Neill, then Head of Museums of Culture and Sport Glasgow, at *Legacy of City Arts Projects* event. October, 2008.

31 This refers back to the Wanker definition from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) that defines ‘Wanker’ as British vulgar slang for: “a contemptible person.”



I began this text with a reference to Beckett's stage direction - *Repeat Play*. Within *Play* the intention, of course, is not to utterly and wholly replicate the script. Beckett himself acknowledged and called for '*slight variations*' the second time around. This *slight variation* comes in the unique pauses, slips, ad libs and mistakes of the actors, repeating their texts at lawn-mower speeds. Indeed, this slight variation offers salvation from the absurdity of an endlessly repeated futile life, and in regards to this text, I am seeking this salvation in the plural definitions of practice that can emerge once we acknowledge its histories. The omnipresent assumptions of 'social benefit' within participatory practices is akin to Beckett's stage direction: it is the oft-repeated instruction when working with people within the public realm. The futility of this assumption hits me the same ways as reading that stage direction for the first time, as a melodramatic teenager.

My call for more agonism within the practice is, I hope, the slight variation that makes the absurdity bearable, and to conclude, I refer to this text's title - *The Artist As Social Worker Vs. The Artist as a Social Wanker*. It alludes to the notion of an agonistic participatory artwork and argues that the artist not be the benign and ameliorating force for 'good' assumed of it, but rather a more aggressive character.

The word *wanker*, as I mention in the footnotes above, stems not from the pejorative for a masturbator, but rather for the uniquely British slang for 'a contemptible person.' In a more international context, it is perhaps closer to a '*jerk*'. I use this term as someone who is contemptible is guilty of the offence of being disobedient to or disrespectful to accepted structures authority and order, and I would argue, this is where the power of this type of work can lie. It challenges power structures. The '*How*' is enacted via agonistic challenge, not from replicating some questionable moral order. The '*how*' comes in understanding that all great art - of whatever form - lies in such a critical approach.

The 'Social Wanker' then is the artist who freely employs strategies that are disobedient or disrespectful to systems of order and power. As a Social Wanker he/she can provide multiple ways of thinking and be critical of hegemonies, allowing a multiplicity of perspectives and avoiding the recapitulation of the spheres that limit social experience.

The social betterment that this provides allows participants and audiences to break out of the spheres of intent that limit them and offers the potential for transformation - allowing those involved in the project to see the world for what it is and its interactions afresh. I therefore propose the artist interested in social betterment be less of a social worker and more of a Social Wanker. It is only via this mode that true and ethical social betterment can be possible.

*Repeat Text.*